

First Methodist Episcopal Church
1208 13th Street
Intown Neighborhood
Altoona
Blair County
Pennsylvania

HABS No. PA-5521

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PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20013-7127

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
FIRST METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH
HABS No. PA-5521

Location: 1208 13th St. (northeast corner of 13th Street and 12th Avenue), Altoona, Blair County, Pa.

Present Owner: First Methodist Episcopal Church.

Present Use: Church.

Significance: Built of rough-faced Hummelstown brownstone with smooth-faced brownstone accents, the First Methodist Episcopal Church and its adjoining rectory were designed by M. R. Brown of New York City in 1905. The well-preserved building boasts more than seventy memorial windows and one of the largest congregations in the city.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1905-07. The cornerstone was laid September 24, 1905. The building was dedicated April 27, 1907.
2. Architect: M. R. Brown of New York City.
3. Original and subsequent owners: In 1858, John Wright, a Methodist, "donated" a desirable 100' x 120' corner lot to the trustees of the First Methodist Episcopal Church for \$100. (Deed Book K/364)
4. Builder: P. W. Finn of Altoona.
5. Original plans and construction: The church was designed to seat 1,600 in the main auditorium and two galleries, and another 800 in its Sunday school facilities, located on the ground floor. The cost of structure and furnishings totalled \$81,000.
6. Alterations and additions: The 115'-high steel steeple was removed in 1940, due to leaks it developed when struck by lightning in 1936, and at one time, other smaller spires rose above the cornice line. In 1949 a new chandelier was installed in the center of the auditorium, replacing the one that fell to the floor in 1947.

In 1963, the church built a one-story brick wing next door on 12th Avenue, replacing the landmark Baltzell Mansion, which had been used as a church house since 1927. The mansion was designed by Charles M. Robinson in 1889, and purchased by the church in 1910. In addition, the church's original terra cotta roof was recently resingled with slate.

B. Historical Context:

The congregation of the First Methodist Episcopal Church was organized in 1851, with a membership of thirty-seven. Led by the Reverend John H. Ryland, who began his work in Altoona in 1853, the congregation erected its first church and rectory at the northeast corner of 12th Avenue and 13th Street in 1854. This first church was a two-story, Gothic Revival-style building constructed of red brick, the building material of choice for five other downtown churches. A detached, frame parsonage stood to the east of the church.

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In 1905-07, the congregation replaced its old building with a magnificent brownstone church and attached rectory designed by M. R. Brown of New York. Homer C. Knox had this to say of the building shortly after its completion: "In the estimation of the Master, a great Sunday school and Church does not consist of a beautiful edifice with brownstone walls, artistically frescoed: not in art glass windows: not in rich velvet carpeting, nor yet in its commodious appointments but in the spirituality of its members."¹ A parsonage, in the same style and materials as the church, is attached to the church on 13th Street.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The church is particularly striking in its massing; large and low, it seems to bug the hill on which it sits.
2. Condition of fabric: Very good. Some of the smaller pieces of carved brownstone ornament have deteriorated.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: The rectangular building measures approximately 100' (12th Avenue) x 120' (13th Street).
2. Foundations: Not visible.
3. Walls: The church has rough-faced, random-coursed, ashlar brownstone walls, with smooth brownstone used for trim and accents. The cornerstone, which reads "First Methodist Episcopal Church 1853-1871-1905," was a gift of the Hummelstown Brownstone Company of Pennsylvania.
4. Structural systems: Steel and reinforced-concrete frame.
5. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: The 12th Avenue entrance is recessed behind a Tudor-arched opening. Directly to the right is the entrance to the chapel, which is Tudor-arched with a transom. The 13th Street entrance is also Tudor-arched, with double columns of beveled-glass sidelights.
6. Roof: Hipped roof covered with new gray slate.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans:
 - a. First: From the 13th Avenue entrance, three sets of double doors open into the auditorium. The pulpit and choir loft face north. Behind the northeast side of the auditorium is a large hall, fitted with a fireplace, and a second corridor.

¹Mary E. Detwiler, History of Altoona, 1849-1909 and First Methodist Church, 1849-1964 (Altoona: Privately printed, 1964), 35.

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- b. Second: There are three balconies; the center one appears to be a recent addition. The first balcony is located along the northeast wall; the center balcony extends across the northwest wall; and the third balcony is located on the southwest side of the church.
- 2. Stairways: There are two stairways on the northeast side of the church, connecting the original building to the new wing and the balconies.
- 3. Flooring: The entrance vestibules have green and white tile floors. The auditorium and chapel originally had "elegant Smith Wilton carpet, in exact tone with the fresco." In 1953, this carpet was replaced with a deep wine-colored broadloom carpet. More recently the auditorium was recovered with bright red, wall-to-wall carpet.
- 4. Wall and ceiling finish: Plaster on lath. The ceiling is vaulted and richly embellished.
- 5. Windows: The large, Tudor-arched windows are stained-glass with biblical scenes.
- 6. Original furnishings: The original pews are of quartered oak.
- 7. Mechanical systems:
 - a. Heating: Steam.
 - b. Lighting: The church was equipped with electric lighting and emergency gas.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

- A. Original architectural drawings: None located.
- B. Early views: Photographs of the church under construction in 1906, and the completed church in its original, unaltered state, appear in Mary E. Detwiler, History of Altoona, 1849-1909 and First Methodist Church, 1849-1964 (Altoona: Privately printed, 1964), unnumbered. In possession of the First Methodist Episcopal Church.
- C. Bibliography:
 - 1. Primary sources:
 - Altoona, Pennsylvania. New York: Sanborn Map and Publishing Co., Ltd., 1888.
 - Insurance Maps of Altoona, Pennsylvania. New York: Sanborn-Perris Co., 1894.
 - Insurance Maps of Altoona, Blair County, Pennsylvania. New York: Sanborn Map Co., 1909.
 - 2. Secondary sources:
 - Clark, Charles B. Illustrated Altoona. Altoona: Privately printed, 1896.
 - Detwiler, Mary E. History of Altoona, 1849-1909 and First Methodist Church, 1849-1964. Altoona: Privately printed, 1964.

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First Methodist Episcopal Church. Third Anniversary of the Dedication of the New Church.
Altoona: Privately printed, 1910.

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

This report was part of a larger project to document the city of Altoona, Pennsylvania. The project was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record (HABS/HAER), Robert Kapsch, chief, at the request of America's Industrial Heritage Project (AIHP), Randy Cooley, director. An overview of the history of the city (HABS No. PA-5784) and an overview of the downtown (HABS No. PA-5789) provide context for these buildings as well as a comprehensive list of sources. See also additional HABS reports on buildings in the city and other neighborhoods.

This report was prepared by Nancy Spiegel in the summer of 1989 under the direction of Alison K. Hoagland, HABS historian. Spiegel's and other project historians' work was published as Railroad City: Four Historic Neighborhoods in Altoona, Pennsylvania (Washington, D.C.: HABS/HAER, National Park Service, 1990), edited by Kim E. Wallace and Sara Amy Leach.